

PUTTING THE POWER BACK INTO EMPOWERMENT:
A CONSTRUCTION OF THE EMPOWERED STATE AND THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

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Despite its consistent use and application by management scientists and practitioners alike, an in-depth review of the empowerment literature concludes the construct lacks conceptual clarity, leaving research surrounding the construct of empowerment questionable. It is critical that a clear conceptualization of the empowered state exist to increase the utility of the phenomenon and allow for the development of the empowerment process. After a detailed review of past and current approaches to defining empowerment, a clarified and more accurate definition of the empowered state is presented. Keeping in mind its power roots and its multidimensional nature, the empowered state is defined as a psychological state reflecting autonomy, control, and accountability. These components reflect an employee who reaches an empowered state perceiving they have authority and self governance over their own work and aspects of their work environment, and knowing they are held accountable in their work outcomes. Once this reconceptualization of the empowered state has been thoroughly discussed, a model of the empowerment process is proposed, identifying factors impacting the degree to which an employee experiences an empowered state, the antecedents and outcomes of such a state, and other mediating variables.

Empowerment stems from the understanding that not all expertise and knowledge can be held at the top of a hierarchy in a competitive knowledge economy, and that a command and control structure is not an effective answer when uncertainty and rapid change require an agile workforce that can act quickly to adapt to unique changes and new challenges. Research has shown that an empowered employee experiences higher job (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000) and employee satisfaction (Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000), higher organizational commitment (Liden et al., 2000; Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011), lower strain and stress (Menon, 1995), fewer turnover intentions (Seibert et al., 2011), and better performance on the job (Chen & Klimoski, 2003), among other desirable outcomes. Knowing these positive outcomes of empowerment is what drives academic interest in the subject and practitioner application of empowerment interventions.

Despite the interest in empowerment, there is compelling evidence that the construct is not well understood. The commonly used definitions of empowerment in the management literature result in a broad and varying conceptualization of the term. Definitions equate empowerment to all of the following: a lack of powerlessness and enhanced self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988); impact, competence, and meaningfulness (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995b); choice (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990); self-determination (Spreitzer, 1995b); goal internalization and control (Menon, 1995); decision-making ability (Ford & Fottler, 1995; Wall, Cordery, & Clegg, 2002); and practices that make others feel competent and motivated (Wall et al., 2002; Leach, Wall, & Jackson, 2003), that pass responsibility (Waterson et al., 1999), or that bestow autonomy (Robert et al., 2000) to others.

This lack of accordance in the meaning of empowerment is paralleled in practitioner use of the word. For example, Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa in Atlantic City, New Jersey, claims to be empowering its employees simply by installing an online HR management system and portal software

(Roberts, 2004). Does empowerment simply equate to access to information? Wegmans boasts that its employees are empowered because they have the go ahead to obtain a product for a customer if it is not found on a store shelf (Owens, 2009). Guest Quarters Suite Hotels claims to empower its employees by encouraging them to satisfy customer needs without asking permission first (Weaver, 1994). Does empowerment equate to the freedom to deliver customer service without having to check with a manager? Guest Quarters Suite Hotels also explains that their employees are empowered because they have control over their career development (Weaver, 1994). So does empowerment equate to the permission to set one's own career goals? Call center employees at American Express Co. are "empowered" because they are allowed to carry on an unscripted conversation (Frauenheim, 2010). Is empowerment, then, freedom from structure? To sum, Major (2010) accurately stated that empowerment is "a term that once meant something specific but eventually came to mean nothing as people attempted to lump all their corporate agendas under the then popular banner."

It is blatantly obvious that a clear conceptualization, operationalization, and application of empowerment do not exist. The benefits of empowerment can be great, but if we have yet to grasp what it means to be empowered, how can management scientists connect empowerment with other constructs and how can organizations know how to help their employees reach such a state? Empowerment cannot be fitted into a broader context until its meaning is understood and agreed upon. Antecedents and outcomes cannot be established without a clear definition for fear that measures developed to test the construct and its related variables will not be valid. Before empowerment can be applied as a solution for broader issues, the construct itself and its surrounding variables must be better understood.

This paper reconceptualizes empowerment in the form of the empowered state and the empowerment process in order to gain a much needed foundation for a currently volatile construct.

The first section of this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the current approaches to understanding empowerment and discusses limitations of these definitions and models. The second section of this paper argues for a revised and more accurate definition of the empowered state; specifically, it is proposed that the empowered state is a psychological state reflecting autonomy, control, and accountability. By labeling this the *empowered state* instead of *empowerment*, the *empowerment process*—which takes in the surrounding variables and relationships including antecedents, outcomes, and mediators—can be differentiated from the internal state of the employee. Once the conceptualization of the empowered state is clear, both (a) the answer to how an organization can best assist an employee in reaching such a state, and (b) the outcomes and benefits to the employee and organization of experiencing such a state, can be explored. This is the focus of the third and final section of this paper, which presents the empowerment process.

APPROACHES TO CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a critical piece of the evolution of attitudes toward management over the past century. Out of the early 1900s hierarchical structure of organizations came management (Burnham, 1941), during which time organizations were growing in size and variety of products and services, begging a need for management to become a specialized function in organizations (Preston & Post, 1974). The typical rank and file employee lacked control over their employment (i.e. work conditions, job security) and work processes (Menon, 1995). Toward the middle of the 20th century, a “new industrial state” emerged as ownership and control began to be found in separate persons (Berle & Means, 1932), and the list of tasks for which managers were responsible lengthened (Galbraith, 1967). But as organizations began to flatten (Spreitzer, 1995a) and the hierarchical structure lost its attractiveness, we have moved into the current era of participative management, fitting to the current postindustrial age (Preston & Post, 1974). Long since has the attitude that workers dislike the

possession of control, and want and need to be directed been challenged; instead, many employers are seeing the advantage to viewing employees as being self-motivated, creative, and committed to the organization (e.g. Hall, 1994), which is what McGregor (1960) termed the Theory Y approach.

There are three trains of thought within management literature on how to define the construct of empowerment, each of which will be reviewed in this section. First, the power approach recognizes that a unique and advantageous effect exists when power is shared between a manager and an employee. Second, the participative management approach turns away from a focus on the power itself and concentrates on the process of sharing power. Both of these approaches are riddled with numerous singular definitions of empowerment. More recently, a third approach has developed—the multidimensional approach—characterized by a focus on the multidimensional nature of empowerment and the psychological state an employee experiences when they are empowered.

The Power Approach

The study of empowerment grew from the power literature upon the realization that allowing employees to share power with management had positive effects on employees. Power is defined in many different ways, from “an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments” (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003 p265), to the control over resources of value (Tjosvold, 1985). Note that power is not prestige (which, if present, is more likely an outcome of power), influence (which is “persuasive while power is coercive”) or dominance, (which is psychological while power is sociological) (Bierstedt, 1950, p731-732). Defining power in terms of control over resources is most pertinent to empowerment. If a manager is willing to share power with an employee, then that power can encourage effectiveness through access to information and the command of cooperation (Kanter, 1979). An employee with some or all of French and Raven’s (1959) five bases of power (expert, legitimate, coercive, reward, and referent), for

example, has clearance to the resources and information needed to complete a job more efficiently. They possess more control over their job and the resources needed to successfully complete that job.

The power approach is supported by research that demonstrates how differences in power between a manager and an employee affect behavior. For example, high-power individuals are more likely than low-power individuals to assist and train poor performers and less likely to simply compensate for them (Ferguson, Ormiston, & Moon, 2010). The context of a situation matters, too, and affects how power may be used: when goals are known to be cooperative, superiors will support direct subordinates, but when goals are known to be competitive or individualistic, superiors will not use their resources to assist subordinates (Tjosvold, 1985). Power differences also influence the employee's behavior. McClelland's Need Theory states that employees vary on the individual difference of need for power, and employees high in need for power and who are granted power will seek to help and empower others as long as this is accompanied by a positive power orientation (McClelland, 1961).

Many singular definitions of empowerment exist that focus on power. Fawcett et al. (1994) define empowerment as "the process of gaining influence over events and outcomes of importance to an individual or group" (p471). Mathieu, Gilson, and Ruddy (1994) define empowerment at the team level to be "team member's collective belief that they have the authority to control their proximal work environment and are responsible for their team's functioning" (p98). Ford and Fottler (1995) explain empowerment in terms of decision making ability over job content and job context, with Participatory Empowerment being moderate decision making over both content and context. Finally, Alge, Ballinger, Tangirala, and Oakley (2006) define empowerment as "the feeling that people have some control over their surroundings and experience meaning in what they do" (p221).

The Participative Management Approach

While some empowerment researchers chose to concentrate on power, others have shifted their focus to the act of sharing that power. This approach centers on the idea of giving someone—usually a subordinate—not only an ability (*enable*) but also permission to participate. Participation is defined as the process of influence sharing among individuals at different places within the organizational hierarchy (Wagner, 1994, Locke & Schweiger, 1979), and such practices “balance the involvement of managers and their subordinates in information-processing, decision-making, or problem-solving endeavors” (Wagner, 1994, p312). Power research emphasized the concept’s interpersonal and thus external nature, so the shift to empowerment being viewed as an action between a manager and a subordinate was a natural one. In other words, this approach concentrates on the *relationship* and *exchange* of power, flexibility, and responsibility between a manager and an employee, since, as Burke (1986) acknowledges, “the sharing of power... creates conditions whereby people involved may be empowered” (p53). Participative management techniques require the manager and subordinate to play critical roles: the manager must initiate an active exchange, and without a leader or manager to bestow power, flexibility, and responsibility on the employee, the potential for empowerment would be nonexistent; similarly, without an employee on which to bestow these elements, empowerment is again nonexistent.

Participative management researchers drew not only from the power literature but also from the leadership and justice literatures. A prevailing classic in the leadership literature that applies participative management is a study conducted by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) who studied the differences among groups with autocratic, democratic, and laissez faire leader styles, finding that democratic groups who participated and were given more choice maintained high productivity whether the leader was present or not. An entire era in the study of leadership—the Power-Influence Era—defined a leader by their amount and type of power and how they exercised this power. While this era

acknowledges the leader as the dominant figure in the relationship, early study of power in leadership led to the question of the amount of power the follower should have. Many of the situational leadership theories—including Yukl’s (1971) Multiple Linkage Model, Hersey and Blanchard’s (1969) Situational Leadership Theory, and House’s (1971) Path-Goal Theory—rely on follower readiness and the ability of the leader to relinquish power, use influence tactics effectively, and overall reduce limitations on the follower (Yukl, 1989). The justice literature—specifically the work on procedural justice—also indirectly applies to participative management by demonstrating how the involvement of the subordinate in the process of decision making can influence their cognitive and behavioral responses to the decision being made. For example, productivity levels after an organizational change were shown to be higher in groups who participated in the processes of the change (Coch & French, 1948).

A handful of singular definitions of empowerment exist that focus on participative management. Neilson (1986) claimed that “empowerment involves giving subordinates the resources, both psychological and technical, to discover the varieties of power they themselves have and/or can accumulate” (p80). Leach et al. (2003) suggest empowerment to be “a systemic change involving not only the provision of authority to take a greater range of decisions and actions, but also alignments within the wider system to enable operators to deploy that enhanced authority” (p37).

Conger and Kanungo (1988) were some of the first authors to formally define empowerment in the management literature, and they suggest it to be “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (p474). These authors introduced a process model involving five stages. The authors juxtaposed a state of powerlessness against one of power, stating that conditions leading to

powerlessness must be removed and can be done so through participative management techniques. Only then can self-efficacy flourish and result in an empowering experience and behavioral outcomes. However, a number of weaknesses exist in this conceptualization of empowerment. A first weakness is the manner in which the definition confuses participative management and empowerment by defining the latter in terms of actions that can be taken by managers and leaders to help other organizational members move from a state of powerlessness. A second problem with this model is the heavy focus on the powerless: if the identification of powerlessness is what begins the process of empowerment, then does this mean that those employees who are not powerless should not and/or cannot be empowered? A third problem with this approach to empowerment is that it equates the construct with high self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is not a sufficient requirement for empowerment, and simply having a can-do attitude does not mean an individual is empowered. Since this suggestion, Spreitzer (1995b) has separated self-efficacy from empowerment, suggesting it to be an antecedent of the construct. Seibert et al. (2011) further proposed that it is not only self-efficacy, but one's entire core self-evaluation (CSE) that is relevant. CSE consists of self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and neuroticism (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997; Judge, Lock, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). Seibert et al. (2011) found that positive self-evaluation traits were indeed positively associated with psychological empowerment. To date, then, Conger and Kanungo's equating of empowerment to self-efficacy has been discredited, and instead self-efficacy and related constructs (e.g. locus of control, self-esteem, emotional stability) have been shown to be antecedents of empowerment.

The Multidimensional Approach

Beginning with Thomas and Velthouse in 1990, a series of authors have focused on the multidimensional, psychological nature of empowerment, defining it according to the components that make up the construct. This approach focuses on the internal state of the employee experiencing

empowerment. The multidimensional approach to defining empowerment has gained a great deal of momentum and support in the empowerment literature as of late, evidenced by the number of authors who have utilized these previously suggested definitions (e.g. Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, and Rosen (2007) use Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) definition; Seibert et al. (2011) and Zhang and Bartol (2010) use Spreitzer's (1995b) definition). With this said, there are relatively few studies in the empowerment literature that focus on the nature of empowerment itself and not solely on antecedents and outcomes of the construct. Three such studies stand out as being a part of the evolution of the current beliefs about the concept of the multidimensional approach to empowerment. An analysis of these three multidimensional definitions will be discussed next. A summary of the components each author suggests as the definition for empowerment can be seen in Table 1.

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Thomas and Velthouse (1990). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) take on empowerment as a motivational construct, arguing that “empowerment has become popular because it provides a label for a nontraditional paradigm of motivation” (p667). Their “cognitive components of intrinsic motivation” include impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice (p671). In their model, environmental events (e.g. leadership, delegation, job design, reward systems) first provide data and information to an employee about their past and future behavior and lead them to task assessments. Second, while these task assessments are specific to the task at hand, the employee also considers their global assessments of the task, or their beliefs toward the tasks in other situations at other times. Third and finally, the employee's attributions, evaluations, and vision of future events—or their interpretive styles—influence the task assessments. The crux of the model, then, is that the task assessments do or do not

cause intrinsic motivation to behave in a certain way, such as actively pursuing a task, concentrating on a task, or demonstrating initiative, resiliency, or flexibility in task accomplishment. In sum, the authors equate empowerment to intrinsic motivation which results from beliefs in impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice of a task.

The illustration of important ideas about the cognitions that precede behavior is a contribution of Thomas and Velthouse's work. One drawback to their model, however, is that motivation cannot be equated to empowerment. Motivation, or the "psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed" (Mitchell, 1982, p81), does surround empowerment in that a manager must have some motivation to want to empower an employee and an employee must be motivated to (a) accept empowerment if presented to them through participative management techniques or through an environment created by the organization, or (b) seek empowerment if they desire it but it is not directly presented to them. But this makes motivation an antecedent to empowerment. Furthermore, motivation has also been found to be an outcome of empowerment (Menon, 1995). With motivation being supported as both an antecedent and an outcome to empowerment, it cannot be equated to empowerment itself. Another drawback to Thomas and Velthouse's work is that some of the chosen components of empowerment—namely impact, competence, and meaningfulness—may not best reflect the psychological state of an empowered employee. This is discussed further when the clarified definition of the empowered state is presented.

Spreitzer (1995b). Spreitzer (1995b) bases her work off both Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990), but suggests that the components of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact make up a construct called *psychological empowerment*. She hypothesizes that two personality traits—locus of control and self-esteem—as well as access to information and a reward system that recognizes individual accomplishment are antecedents to psychological

empowerment. Hypothesized outcomes to empowerment include managerial effectiveness and innovation. Upon testing the model, the four highly correlated components were each found to contribute to the construct of psychological empowerment. The author adds to the explanation of this conceptualization of empowerment by pointing out assumptions regarding Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) explanation of empowerment: empowerment is not a personality trait but a "set of cognitions shaped by the work environment;" empowerment is a continuous variable; and empowerment must be considered in a work domain context, as it does not generalize to other situations (p1444). In sum, the author argues that empowerment is a psychological state characterized by a sense of meaning in the task, of competence and self-determination in completing the task, and impact of the task.

A handful of issues with Spreitzer's model call into question the legitimacy of her conceptualization of the construct. First, it is true that Spreitzer's model is highly suggestive of the psychological nature of empowerment, but because there has yet to be a widely agreed-upon definition of empowerment, there is no need to rename the construct by adding an adjective, *psychological*. The components of empowerment should reflect its psychological nature, not the name itself.

Another drawback to the four component approach to empowerment endorsed by both Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer is the chosen components of empowerment. First, impact is presented as the effect an employee can have on their environment. Thomas and Velthouse juxtapose this against learned helplessness, both universal (no matter how well one performs, impact is unlikely) and personal (impact is likely if one is competent to perform to certain standards) (p672). Spreitzer, drawing from work by Ashforth (1989), terms impact as "the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work" (p1443-1444); but while Spreitzer uses these words to define impact, Ashforth uses them to define participation, saying that a lack of

participation and autonomy defines a state of powerlessness (p207). There is no clear explanation of what impact is; the most a reader can grasp is that impact concerns the external environment.

Second, competence is conceptualized as how skillfully an employee can complete their work (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), self-efficacy (Spreitzer, 1995b), or “the extent to which the employee believes he or she is capable of executing the behaviors required to deal with and successfully accomplish tasks required by his or her role” (Menon, 1995, p32). The fact that self-efficacy is an antecedent to empowerment, and not empowerment itself, has already been established. Moreover, being competent or skillful in one’s job does not mean one has power in some form. Being competent in one’s work may be a sign that an employee understands their role and tasks, and ultimately components of the empowered state such as autonomy or control may follow. But this would then make competence an antecedent of empowerment, not empowerment itself.

Third, meaningfulness is regarded as the amount of value placed on the task as weighted by the employee (Spreitzer, 1995b; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). There are many jobs (e.g. nurses, teachers), however, in which an employee views their work as having meaning and value but that do not reflect power. The inclusion of this variable by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) is due to their motivational approach: the authors cite how apathy can result from low levels of meaningfulness, and that having meaning in one’s job can be motivational. But while having meaning in one’s work may increase an employee’s motivation, because motivation is an antecedent (or outcome) of empowerment and not empowerment itself (as established above), this would, at best, make meaningfulness an antecedent to empowerment.

Menon (1995). Finally, Menon (1995) suggested a different set of empowerment components—perceived control, perceived competence, and goal internalization—and argued these formed what Spreitzer (1995b) had termed *psychological empowerment*. The problem with this

approach is again that all of the selected components of empowerment do not describe empowerment. Competence was discounted in the paragraph above. Moreover, goal internalization is defined by Menon as the degree to which an employee has internalized the goals of and identified with the organization. In his explanation of the component, Menon uses terms such as “sense of purpose,” “inspiration,” and commitment (p32). Organizational commitment, however, does not guarantee autonomy, control, or other aspects of or types of power. Being inspired by one’s work may lead to believing in a cause, not necessarily a company (which would then relate back to meaningfulness). And all employees who internalize an organization’s goals do not necessarily receive power in exchange for their commitment. There are many employees who dedicate their life to a company yet are never promoted past an entry-level position due to other issues such as ability, for example.

A RECONCEPTUALIZATION: THE EMPOWERED STATE

With the currently suggested definitions of empowerment offering little conceptual clarity, I argue for a new multidimensional definition of the empowered state that focuses on a different set of components, namely autonomy, control, and accountability. In other words, an employee experiencing an empowered state will reflect the authority to act on choices regarding their own work (i.e. autonomy) and their work environment (i.e. control), and they will accept responsibility and being held accountable and answerable for their work. Each of these three components is expanded upon in this section. For each component, the definition as it applies to the proposed clarified definition of the empowered state, a brief review of literature on the component, and finally the component as it compares to previously suggested components by other authors, is presented.

Autonomy

In the clarified definition of the empowered state, autonomy refers to self-governance in the method and timing of one’s work.

Autonomy Literature. Having a sense of autonomy over one's job is a critical and necessary component of the empowered state. In the aptly named article *The need for autonomy among managers*, Harrell and Alpert (1979) say that many employees strive for autonomy, which is a factor that makes small businesses, entrepreneurial ventures, and other professions (e.g. physician) attractive. While autonomy is sometimes thought of in terms of simply decision making power (Kirmeyer & Shirom, 1986; Robey, Bakr, & Miller, 1977; Takeuchi, Shay, & Li, 2008), it is more than that. One of the best known conceptualizations of autonomy comes from Hackman and Oldham (1976), who define autonomy in terms of the freedom over how and when to work. They introduced autonomy as one of their "core job dimensions," building from the concept that job characteristics can affect employee attitudes and behavior. They argue that autonomy promotes feelings of responsibility for work outcomes. This job characteristic adds a sense of a job being personal to an employee such that the employee understands that their "own efforts, initiatives, and decisions" are what influence outcomes (p258). Specifically, these authors define autonomy as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (p258). That is, autonomy is about how an employee manages the details of accomplishing their tasks; it is about not having someone else tell them how to do their job. Note, however, that Hackman and Oldham's job design approach to autonomy does not include other ways in which autonomy can be present; it can also be granted by a manager or assumed by the employee.

Autonomy is often conceptually and operationally confounded with control, and as these are two separate components in the proposed definition of the empowered state, it is critical highlight their differences. Although the conceptual definition must be established prior to engaging in operationalization discussions, understanding how these components are currently operationalized in

the literature helps to demonstrate the confusion these two variables can cause. Autonomy is measured in line with its definition of focusing on the internal freedom an employee has over the logistics of their work.

For example, Hackman and Oldham (1974) developed a three item scale to measure autonomy which asks questions regarding an employee's freedom to decide how to do their work and the use of their own initiative and discretion in carrying out their work. Quinn and Staines' (1979) scale is similar, asking questions about an employee's freedom to decide how to do their work, when to take breaks, with whom to work, and the speed at which they work. Breugh (1985), however, points out that Hackman and Oldham's scale confounds autonomy and independence, which, as he argues, are two separate constructs: an employee may not have discretion in how and when to work and yet work without someone looking over their shoulder (e.g. a bus driver). Breugh (1985) thus argues for measuring three separate aspects of autonomy: work method autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, and work criteria autonomy. The first deals with *how* an employee completes their work: it is "the degree of discretion/choice individuals have regarding the procedures (methods) they utilize in going about their work" (p556). The second deals with *when* an employee completes their work: it is "the extent to which workers feel they can control the scheduling/sequencing/timing of their work activities" (p556). The third deals with *what* an employee completes as their work: it is "the degree to which workers have the ability to modify or choose the criteria used for evaluating their performance" (p556).

Autonomy Compared to Previously Suggested Components. Autonomy is similar to Spreitzer's (1995b) explanation of self-determination, which is based on Deci, Connell, and Ryan's (1989) definition of "experience[ing] a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions" (p580), but this is not specific to actions regarding oneself (versus actions regarding others, which will be subsequently discussed as *control*). Moreover, self-determination is closely linked with intrinsic

motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The empowered state is about acquiring power over oneself, others, and the work environment. A person is granted autonomy, but they cannot be granted self-determination. Self-determination is instead an individual characteristic developed only by the individual.

Control

In the clarified definition of the empowered state, I define control as the authority over one's work environment in the form of direction over other people, processes, or information.

Control Literature. While my definition separates control from autonomy, I must again point out that the two do not have a good history of separation in the management literature. *Job control* is a construct defined similarly to autonomy and operationalized in nearly an identical manner. Job control is a construct synonymous with “discretion” such as with Karasek's (1979) demand-control model in which demands on the job paired with a lack of control (or in other words low decision latitude) leads to job strain. Higher job control is also thought to be negatively correlated with fatigue (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). When operationalized, job control becomes synonymous with autonomy. For example, Jackson, Wall, Martin, and Davis (1993) break control down into two parts: timing and method. In fact, these authors attribute this “distinction between timing and method control” to Breugh (1985), yet Breugh makes the distinction between timing (i.e. “scheduling”) and method (i.e. “method”) *autonomy*, not control. Furthermore, if we examine survey questions asked to measure job control (e.g. Jackson et al., 1993), we find that the questions are almost exactly those that are asked on autonomy scales (e.g. Breugh, 1985). So here, researchers are saying that control is authority over, dominating, and directing *oneself*. This is, exactly, autonomy.

The present reconceptualization allows for an opportunity to remedy this failure of distinction between autonomy and control. Whereas autonomy concerns having the freedom to make decisions

about oneself in the workplace (i.e. how to work, when to work, with whom to work, on what to work, etc.), control concerns authority over, dominating, and directing *others* (i.e. people, procedures, documentation, etc.). The key distinction between the two is the target of the behavior: self vs. other. While this differentiation is not new, it has only been implied, resulting in confusion in the definition and ultimately the operationalization of the two separate constructs.

The reason control is a necessary component for the empowered state goes back to the root word of empowerment: power. Recall French and Raven's (1959) five bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. None of these refer to power over oneself. Power is about having some influence in relation to others or entities in one's external environment. Recall, too, that power is generally defined as "an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments" (Keltner et al., 2003, p265). This definition again points to the external nature of power. The empowered state, then, must include some aspect of power outside of the self.

Control Compared to Previously Suggested Components. Although not included by term in their model, Conger and Kanungo (1988) recognize an employee's relationship with their external environment. While these authors do not focus on the possession of control in their model, they do say that empowerment is about making it such that an employee is not in a state of powerlessness.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) claim that control is too ambiguous a word, and they choose to replace it with impact. They argue that impact is more specific than control since control could include both impact and competence. Impact, they claim, is "the degree to which behavior is seen as 'making a difference' in terms of accomplishing the purpose of a task" (p672). They equate it to knowledge of results in Hackman and Oldham's (1976) model, claim it is similar to locus of control, and suggest it to be the opposite of learned helplessness.

Spreitzer's (1995b) impact component was her way of ensuring the environment external to an employee had a place in empowerment. She takes this ambiguous account of impact and defines it as influencing "strategic, administrative, and operating outcomes" in the workplace (p1443-1444; Ashforth, 1989). But impact and control are not the same; a person with no power may have a striking moment in which they "influence" an important decision, but that does not mean they are the one charged with making that decision, managing those people involved, and seeing the decision through. And although Spreitzer (1995b) may define impact to be a sense of control, her operationalization of impact is vague, asking only about the impact and influence an employee's work has on the department. Impact, too, may be confused with a job that "impacts" third parties (i.e. customers, clients, patients, etc.) in a positive way. These authors' definitions of impact define the component as being more distal; the definition of control for the present conceptualization, however, is more proximal.

Finally, Menon (1995) included control in his empowerment components, saying that "to have power is to experience a sense of control" (p20), which is "contingent on the ability to completely deal with the surrounding environment and the problems that arise therein" (p21). Ultimately, power, then, according to Menon is about "having control over the actions of others in the context of social interactions" (p21-22). Nowhere in this description does control refer to autonomy, which suggests that Menon, too, recognized how control and autonomy are sometimes confounded.

Accountability

In the clarified definition of the empowered state, accountability is defined as "an implicit or explicit expectation that one's decisions or actions will be subject to evaluation by some salient audience(s) with the belief that there exists the potential for one to receive either rewards or sanctions based on the expected evaluation" (Hall et al., 2003, p33).

Accountability Literature. When an employee is held accountable, it is not only for potential negative actions; it also means answering—or being recognized for—positive outcomes (Frink & Ferris, 1998; Tetlock, 1992). Zajonc (1965) discussed more than four decades ago that the mere presence of others changes individual behavior, let alone when individuals know their actions are identifiable, will be evaluated, or will be explained (see Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, for a list of studies relating to these social facilitation phenomena). Research shows that accountability leads to more complex information processing (Tetlock, 1983) and encourages more time to be spent on decision making (Ford & Weldon, 1981). It also shows that individuals with higher accountability set higher goals than those with lower accountability (Frink & Ferris, 1998). Furthermore, the higher the accountability to coworkers and managers felt by an employee, the greater their trust in those coworkers and managers as well as the higher their job satisfaction (Thomas, Dose, & Scott, 2002).

Accountability acts as a check against power. It is common to hear that responsibility should accompany power, but there is surprisingly little research on this subject in the management literature. Rus, van Knippenberg, and Wisse (2011) did find that when high-power leaders' behaviors were coupled with accountability, these high-power leaders acted less self-servingly than did high-power leaders not held accountable for their actions. Keltner et al. (2003) offer that that high-power individuals will be more attentive to others and will engage in more careful thought. Employees may believe that empowerment "is great as long as they are not held personally accountable" (Argyris, 1998, p98), but when an employee is to be held accountable for what they do with autonomy and control, some may decide they are either not ready or do not want to be empowered. Thus, because it is known that power can corrupt (Kipnis, 1972), accountability in the empowered state as presented here attempts to place a degree of responsibility on the power holder. Moreover, although the essence of the empowerment process is the decentralization of power throughout an organization, an organization

must still keep some degree of control to ensure smooth, efficient operations. In the empowerment process, organizational control comes through accountability being a necessary part of the empowered state.

Accountability Compared to Previously Suggested Components. Accountability has yet to be included in any definition of empowerment reviewed here, but Wallace Johnson, Mathe, and Paul (2011) connected empowerment and accountability by asking the question of whether “felt accountability” (as opposed to “accountability” to emphasize the perceptual nature of the construct) would change an “empowered” (using Spreitzer’s, 1995b, empowerment definition) employee’s performance. They found that shared felt accountability moderates the relationship between a climate of psychological empowerment and store-level outcomes (i.e. sales and service performance), such that outcomes were higher when accountability was high (but not necessarily low outcomes when accountability was low).

THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

With a clarified definition of the empowered state now in place, the empowerment process can be built. Some of the antecedents and outcomes of the empowered state have already been tested by other researchers, but because the definition of the empowered state differs from previous definitions of empowerment, these relationships need to be revalidated. Three of the previously suggested components of empowerment—competence, meaningfulness, and goal internalization—are argued to be mediators between antecedents to the empowered state and the empowered state itself. The empowerment process is depicted in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The clarified definition of the empowered state presents the construct as a multidimensional construct with three distinct components: autonomy, defined as self-governance in the method and timing of one's work; control, defined as the authority over one's work environment in the form of direction over other people, processes, or information; and accountability, defined as "an implicit or explicit expectation that one's decisions or actions will be subject to evaluation by some salient audience(s) with the belief that there exists the potential for one to receive either rewards or sanctions based on the expected evaluation" (Hall et al., 2003, p33). In order to show the construct's multidimensional nature, it will be important to establish that the components are non-redundant and indeed support the latent variable of the empowered state.

Proposition 1: The three factor model of the empowered state—including autonomy, control, and accountability—will fit the data better than alternative models of the empowered state.

Antecedent Variables

The empowered state has three different categories of antecedents: participative management, contextual antecedents, and individual characteristics.

The first antecedent grouping is that of participative management, or those behaviors initiated by a leader or manager that assist in preparing an employee to reach an empowered state. Participative management is one of the vehicles by which an employee can become empowered, and often the most important, considering a manager's relationship with an employee is more proximal than an organization's relationship with an employee (which then would concern the antecedent grouping of contextual antecedents). While there are many behaviors that can fall into this category (see Seibert et al., 2011 for a list), I have chosen to focus on five overarching categories of participative management techniques as formulated by Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, and Drasgow (2000). By interviewing leaders in three empowering organizations, the authors factor analyzed a list of participative management techniques, reducing the list to the following five they found to be most important:

- leading by example, or behaviors that show the leader's commitment to his or her own work as well as the work of his/her team members;
- coaching, or behaviors that educate team members and help them to become self-reliant;
- participative decision making, or a leader's use of team members' information and input in making decisions;
- informing, or the leader's dissemination of company wide information such as mission and philosophy as well as other important information;
- showing concern/interacting with the team, which includes behaviors that demonstrate a general regard for team members' well being, as well as behaviors that are important when interfacing with the team as a whole (p254-255).

Although these were developed through the examination of teams in empowered environments, the items are also individual appropriate and have been used to measure characteristics of the employee-manager dyadic relationship (Boudrias, Gaudreau, Savoie, & Morin, 2009).

Proposition 2: Participative management—in the forms of (a) leading by example, (b) coaching, (c) participative decision making, (d) informing, and (e) showing concern/interacting with the employee—will positively influence the empowered state.

The second antecedent grouping is contextual antecedents, or the preparatory steps an organization can take to develop a conducive environment in anticipation of fostering the development of empowered employees. In general, these concern creating an organizational culture supportive of the empowered state and the empowerment process. One contextual antecedent will be included in this model: access to information and resources. This contextual antecedent is not too broad in nature (such as organizational culture) but yet not so narrowly focused such as being specific to job design (e.g. task identity, task significance, skill variety). It is also not complicated to implement, and thus if supported in the empowerment process presented here, it will be a simple recommendation for organizations looking to be supportive of the empowered state and the empowerment process.

To elaborate, providing employees with access to information and resources allows them to complete their work with fewer roadblocks and with more ease. After all, “one of the key components of a supportive organization is a climate in which teams can openly communicate with one another and freely share and exchange information” (Mathieu et al., 2006, p99). Other authors have already shown

findings of access to information (Kanter, 1989; Spreitzer, 1995a, 1995b) as being an antecedent of empowerment as it has previously been defined. Spreitzer (1995a) states that “to be seen as empowering, top management must provide immediate, direct communication in real time to give people the information they need to act” (p608). Moreover, in their case-study context, Foster-Fishman and Keys (1995) suggest a list of conditions that must be present for any empowerment program to be effective, one of which is making resources available for employees to conduct their work successfully. Recall, too, that power can be defined as control over desired resources, so providing access to resources will lead to an employee feeling powerful (a necessary but not sufficient condition for the empowered state).

Proposition 3: Access to information and resources will positively influence the empowered state.

Finally, the third antecedent grouping is individual characteristics, or those traits an employee may possess or those qualities they can seek to obtain that can help them embrace an empowered state. It is important to recognize individual differences in employees and how those differences alter the manner in which employees react to their work. Other models have included individual differences (e.g. for Hackman and Oldham’s (1976) Job Characteristics Model, the individual difference was growth needs strength). In the present model, the individual characteristic of interest is self-efficacy. Recall that some of the earlier conceptualizations of empowerment (e.g. Conger and Kanungo, 1988) centered on the importance of an employee receiving self-efficacy information and building their self-efficacy. Other authors have continued this trend of closely relating self-efficacy and empowerment; in fact, Wood and Bandura (1989) stated that “perceived self-efficacy concerns people’s beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives” (p364). But self-efficacy has been grouped into a larger set of individual differences—CSE—and expanding this self-evaluation idea to the set of core self-

evaluations will yield more information about the key individual characteristics leading to the empowered state. Recall that CSE is comprised of locus of control, neuroticism, generalized self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Seibert et al. (2011) found CSE to be an antecedent of empowerment as it was previously defined by Spreitzer (1995b), arguing that “CSE is thought to represent the fundamental appraisal one makes about one’s worthiness, competence, and capabilities in relation to one’s environment” (p984).

Proposition 4: Core self-evaluation will positively influence the empowered state.

Mediating Variables

While competence, meaningfulness, and goal internalization are not components of the empowered state as suggested by previous authors, it does not mean they do not have a place in our understanding of the construct. In the empowerment process, these three variables are thought to be antecedents to the empowered state, specifically mediators between the antecedent categories and the empowered state. When competence, meaningfulness, and goal internalization were considered to be elements of empowerment by previous authors, they were, then, outcomes of our antecedents. Despite the alterations in the meaning and configuration of the empowered state, these elements are, in fact, still outcomes of the antecedents, but this time in the form of mediators between antecedents and the empowered state instead of being the empowered state itself.

Participative management techniques in the form of leading by example, coaching, participative decision making, informing, and showing concern/interaction will lead an employee to feel competent, find meaning in their work, and internalize goals. Some competencies—such as those directly related to the accomplishment of an assigned task—are required prior to any participative management techniques being used. Other competencies, however—those related to the management and organization of a job—will be gained through the environment created by a manager and the organization. For example, a manager allowing the employee to participate in decision making is a

type of apprenticeship in the empowered state; by “practicing” decision making first under the supervision of a manager, an employee who then exercises autonomy and control will already have higher self-efficacy and the ability to make decisions on their own. In general, then, competence is similar to employee empowerment readiness, defined by Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp (2005) as the possession of task knowledge as well as experience that prepares an employee to thrive in an empowered environment. An employee learning from and adopting characteristics from their manager allows for the employee to identify with and ultimately internalize the goals of the manager, the workgroup, and the organization. And if a manager is taking the time to engage in participative management techniques, they believe their own work to have meaning and be of value, another idea that can be internalized by the employee.

Proposition 5: Participative management will positively influence (a) competence, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) goal internalization.

Contextual antecedents lead to an employee being able to act upon their competencies and better understand the organization so as to internalize its goals and values and ultimately find meaning in how their individual job contributes to the whole. Specifically, having access to information and resources enables an employee to better understand their job and complete tasks more quickly, with less stress, and with higher quality. Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggested that the sharing of information between the organization and the employee was critical. Their entire empowerment model, in fact, was based on the premise of providing efficacy information to an employee so as to remove powerlessness. Building from the work of Bacharach and Lawler (1980) and French and Raven (1959), they point out that having control over information provides employees with power in the form of knowledge and expertise. Spreitzer (1995b) specifically argues that access to information about the mission of the organization is important because it gives employees better decision making ability; that is, it builds the competence they need to do their job well. But contextual antecedents do

not only help to build the competence of an employee. Having the information of how the employee's task fits into the overall goals of the organization increases the meaningfulness of the employee's work, too. Furthermore, it allows an employee to know that their tasks make a difference in the success or failure of the organization's goals, thus marking them with value, which in turn makes an employee identify more with the organization.

Proposition 6: Contextual antecedents will positively influence (a) competence, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) goal internalization.

As mediators, competence, meaningfulness, and goal internalization will influence the empowered state. First, before an employee would feel comfortable taking on the second-order task of having a say in when and how they work or control over their external work environment, they must feel competent in their tasks and believe they have the skills necessary to be successful on the job. An employee with the ability to perform their job well will then be better able to handle the additional responsibilities that accompany autonomy and control, and they will be better equipped to make decisions and answer for those decisions. Second, meaningfulness is important because seeing value in one's work can be motivational (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). An employee who sees the meaning, value, and importance of their tasks will be likely to want more ownership of their work through secondary responsibility (i.e. autonomy and control) and also be more accepting of the accountability that accompanies these additional responsibilities. Finally, when an employee internalizes the goals of their organization, they are more motivated and energized in their own goals (Menon, 1995). Such an employee is more likely to want to achieve their own goals so that the organization can achieve its goals.

Proposition 7: (a) Competence, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) goal internalization will positively influence the empowered state.

Competence, meaningfulness, and goal internalization partially mediate the relationship between the antecedent groupings and the empowered state. These three variables act as the mechanisms through which the empowered state can arise. They are similar to Hackman and Oldham's (1976) critical psychological states in that they are the "causal core of the model" (p255). It is true that the three antecedent groupings may lead directly to the empowered state, but the partial mediation suggests that there are important cognitive changes occurring in the employee that lead to the empowered state. For example, being on the receiving end of participative management techniques does not guarantee that an employee will achieve autonomy and control; if they do achieve these components, it is because the participative management techniques altered them in some way such that they were deserving of these new types of power. Those changes came in the form of being more competent in their work and increasing their abilities, finding more meaning in their work, and identifying more with the organization and internalizing its goals.

Proposition 8: (a) Competence, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) goal internalization will partially mediate the relationship between the antecedent grouping of participative management and the empowered state.

Proposition 9: (a) Competence, (b) meaningfulness, and (c) goal internalization will partially mediate the relationship between the antecedent grouping of contextual antecedents and the empowered state.

Outcome Variables

There are two types of outcomes of the empowered state: attitudinal outcomes and behavioral outcomes. Attitudinal outcomes include reinforcements or changes in the way an employee thinks and feels about their job and work environment, and behavioral outcomes include positive ways in which an empowered employee conducts themselves. A plethora of outcome variables have been linked to previous conceptualizations of empowerment. Here, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and intentions to quit will be examined as attitudinal outcomes of empowerment; job performance is the

proposed behavioral outcome of empowerment in the present model. These outcome variables are broad in nature and can apply to any workplace context.

First, organizational commitment is “a volitional psychological bond reflecting dedication to and responsibility for a particular target” (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). Recall that researchers including Kirkman and Rosen (1999), Liden et al. (2000), and Seibert et al. (2011) have found support for organizational commitment as an outcome of empowerment as it was previously defined.

Furthermore, in their meta-analysis of predictors of turnover, Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner (2000) found that organizational commitment was one of the strongest predictors of turnover, even stronger than job satisfaction. The journey to reaching empowerment involves trust between an employee and a manager, a manager’s commitment to the employee, an organization’s commitment to supporting an environment conducive to the development of empowerment, and an employee being responsive to all of these. Norms of reciprocity, then, suggest that an employee who embraces empowerment will seek to return commitment and “be appreciative of organizations that provide opportunities for decision latitude, challenge, and responsibility” (Liden et al., 2000, p410). More than this, an employee who is going to take the risk of accepting autonomy and control when accountability is attached must be committed to their organization.

Second, job satisfaction is considered to be “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p1300). Recall that a number of researchers (e.g. Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Liden et al., 2000; Menon, 1995; Seibert et al., 2011) found that previous conceptualizations of empowerment led to job satisfaction. As Menon (1995) argued, “if people have a natural striving for control... or competence... then perceptions of control and competence should result in satisfaction” (p54). Similarly, if an individual desires autonomy and control in their job, then achieving these should result in an employee being more satisfied with their

job. Furthermore, when an employee takes more ownership in their work, they should feel more satisfaction. If an employee does not desire control, autonomy, choice, or accountability, then they are lacking an important antecedent (i.e. individual characteristic) needed to reach a high level of the empowered state. If they do desire those components of the empowered state, however, then obtaining them would be satisfying and result in higher job satisfaction.

Third, turnover intentions involve thoughts about leaving the organization voluntarily by an employee. Fewer turnover intentions have been linked to previous models of empowerment (e.g. Seibert et al., 2011). As stated by Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez (2001), “job attitudes combined with job alternatives predict intent to leave, which is the direct antecedent to turnover” (p1102). Mobley (1977), recognizing the negative relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover, suggests mediating steps between the attitude and the behavior: an employee evaluates their existing job and experiences job dissatisfaction; they then think of quitting; an evaluation of the cost of quitting ensues; the employee thinks about, searches, and evaluates alternatives; they then compare these alternatives to their current job; finally, they have intentions to quit or stay before actually quitting or staying. Other, more recent models of turnover (e.g. Lee and Mitchell, 1994) have continued to include both an evaluation of job satisfaction and intentions to quit as antecedents of actual turnover. Because of the high costs of losing an employee, organizations seek to do what they can to retain dedicated workers, which may include the encouragement of participative management and the support of other contextual antecedents to the empowered state. Empowering work can be viewed as a valuable resource to employees (Seibert et al., 2011). If an employee has degrees of freedom in their work and power in other forms such as control over the external environment, they are more likely to have no desire to leave it.

Relationships among these outcome variables have been found in other research.

Organizational commitment has been found to positively correlate with job satisfaction and negatively correlate with withdrawal cognitions (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Not surprisingly, in their meta-analysis, Griffeth et al. (2000) found that job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit were the variables most often studied with employee turnover. Finally, Tett and Meyer (1993) found that both job satisfaction and organizational commitment correlated negatively with turnover intentions. This suggests that some of these outcomes may be more proximal than others to the empowered state, but this differentiation is not examined here.

Proposition 10: High levels of the empowered state will lead to (a) higher organizational commitment, (b) higher job satisfaction, and (c) lower intentions to quit.

Finally, any organizational initiative has the hopes of ultimately improving job performance, a variable that is perhaps the most telling behavioral outcome of the empowered state. Previous studies have established different types of performance as an outcome of the previously defined empowerment (e.g. Liden et al., 2000), but these relationships are often studied in teams and not individuals. The premise for job performance being an outcome of empowerment is the effort to performance to outcome relationship (Ahearne et al, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), that is, that the effort an employee is putting into their job will result in some desired level of performance. An important stage in the empowerment process, as defined by Conger and Kanungo (1988), is the strengthening of this effort to performance relationship. Higher levels of self-efficacy have been shown to lead to job performance (Ahearne et al., 2005), perhaps because individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy better handle their job responsibilities and ultimately perform better. It is believed that employees who have autonomy and take control will be more productive in their work and have higher job performance. Being held accountable for decisions made and behaviors on the job will also make an employee more sensitive to the evaluation of their work, resulting in higher job performance. Note that

job performance may be a more distal outcome than some attitudinal outcomes, but again the proximity of outcome variables in relation to the empowered state is not being examined here.

Proposition 11: High levels of the empowered state will lead to higher job performance.

CONCLUSION

The point of this paper has been to argue for the need of a reconceptualization of empowerment, offer such a reconceptualization in the form of the empowered state, and demonstrate how this newly defined empowered state fits into the broader context of the empowerment process. Previous definitions and models have advanced our understanding of the construct, but a full understanding has not yet been realized. It is hoped that the proposed definition of the empowered state—that is, a psychological state reflecting autonomy, control, and accountability—will move the field forward as a more reliable and valid comprehension of the construct. This is differentiated from the empowerment process which takes into account external features of the empowered employee's environment, including antecedents, outcomes, and mediators relating to the empowered state. The phenomenon of empowerment has much promise in helping to understand other constructs in the field of management and in application and utility for managers in organizations, but this promise will never be realized if we do not first give this construct a solid foundation with conceptual clarity and construct validity.

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TABLE 1
Multidimensional Empowerment Definitions

	Accountability	Autonomy	Choice	Competence	Control	Goal Internalization	Impact	Meaningfulness/Meaning	Self Determination
Thomas & Velthouse (1990)	Increased intrinsic task motivation with a foundation in four cognitions: sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice (p666).								
			X	X			X	X	
Spreitzer (1995b)	“A motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact” (p1444).								
				X			X	X	X
Menon (1995)	“A cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalization” (p30).								
				X	X	X			
Current Article	A psychological state reflecting autonomy, control, and accountability.								
	X	X			X				

FIGURE 1
The Empowerment Process

